

THE WASHINGTON CLUB

Wash. D.C.

67-1

Feb. 1, 1967

Luncheon Speech

Mr. Webb

...With respect to the accident of last Friday, I think I can only say from the very great sadness and sorrow for the men and their families who lost their lives felt by all of us in the space administration, that the young men who were in this capsule know that spacecraft and the system through which it could sustain their lives and permit them to carry out their missions as well as any man have ever known a machine within which they were to do an important job of work, or with which they were to accomplish important work.

Every one of these man an engineer as well as pilot and test pilot and has followed the development of this equipment from its very inception through to the time when they would be launched into space in it and had participated in the design and in the redesign and the perfection and testing of every element of equipment in it.

I think I can say for those of us who have not had the opportunity to participate in space flight who have worked in the program that we have the greatest of confidence in the capability of the systems that have been developed through the use of scientists and universities of this nation, engineers and production people in the industries of this nation and the distinguished and able people in the government laboratories who constitute the central network and who do discharge the final responsibility that goes with governmental authority in the choice of the risks that must be taken and the means through which we will meet those risks.

The systems which have taken us safely through six flights in Mercury, through 10 flights in Gemini--10 flights in which we flew 20 men in 20 months have, we believe, proven the desirability and effectiveness of the methods chosen to accomplish this work. And while we are now undertaking careful investigations of all facets of the accident that occurred on Friday, and are examining in great detail all of the recorded information that was coming in from many different systems and measurements taken from instruments in many, many different locations

associated with this test run, we at the same time are trying to make sure that the process by which this information is a fully responsible one.

And this morning I have spoken to both Sen. Anderson, Chairman of the Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences, Chairman George Miller, Chairman of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, of which Mrs. Tongue's husband is the ranking Democrat along with Congressman Miller and our Deputy Administrator, who is the senior technical, professional man in our agency, will go to the Cape tomorrow for the first interim report by the board of the information it has found. He will return and report to both of these gentlemen, Chairman

Clinton Anderson and George Miller and there will be a very, very careful deliberate effort to conduct these investigations so as to do the most responsible job that

And I think when that process is through people will find that while this instance was a tragic one, that the systems that have been developed and have been proven out are good. They may require some modification. This remains to be proven because many, many successes have been built on the technical information on which these systems have been designed, and many, many very careful tests have been run in which these young men, all of them who have to fly these spacecraft, have participated.

I would not like to have anyone believe that the decision for such a solution of a complex problem as a one-gas, pure oxygen breathing system was undertaken without the utmost responsible examination of all alternatives.

One simple thing I believe you ladies and gentlemen can understand is that nitrogen in the blood does release itself when pressure is released. And just as you, men and others who go down deep into the sea or work under it are or in the construction of tunnels under rivers find you get the bends if nitrogen is not removed from the blood, one of our problems has been to determine how best to avoid the worst

that is our responsibility to all of these flights, to see that they have oxygen and have these men on pure oxygen for some time before the flight to make sure there is no nitrogen.

The danger of decompression and the bends is one danger associated with these flights which must be counter-balanced with use of what is, of course, a dangerous atmosphere. But the danger is inherent in many, many of these operations.

Our purpose has been to minimize the danger, to reduce it to an acceptable risk, and to operate on a very simple assumption: that if anything can go wrong, it will, and that we must find those means to simulate the hostile environment so that we can find out what will happen, and correct and eliminate them.

Let me say now a little about what we are trying to do and why we are trying to do it. . .